

11-1-2001

“Normal Church Can’t Take Us”: Re-creating a Pentecostal Identity among the Men and Women of Victory Outreach

Arlene M. Sánchez Walsh
DePaul University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt>

 Part of the [New Religious Movements Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Arlene M. Sánchez Walsh, "Normal Church Can't Take Us': Re-Creating a Pentecostal Identity among the Men and Women of Victory Outreach," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology* 9:2 (Nov. 2001) 48-78.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

"Normal Church Can't Take Us": Re-Creating a Pentecostal Identity among the Men and Women of Victory Outreach

Arlene M. Sánchez Walsh
DePaul University

This article examines the re-creation of a Pentecostal identity among the men and women of a drug rehabilitation ministry called Victory Outreach, and specifically how that identity changes in regard to how they reinforce traditional gender roles in Latino culture, define themselves politically in attempting to use Pentecostalism as a religious salve to soothe social ills, and, finally, how the use of theological pedagogy is used to both affirm the status of the church as a church of the marginalized, and how their educational attainment can be viewed as empowering. In first examining the role of women in the church, the reinforcement of gender roles comes in two main forms. One is the very structure of the rehabilitation process, the other is the grafting on of conservative evangelical theology¹ to a preexisting subordinate cultural construction that most U.S. Latinas have confronted in their lifetimes. Before examining the varied permutations of religious identity, reconstructing the history of Victory Outreach rehabilitation homes and how that organization inculcates a Pentecostal identity serves as one of my first tasks. Before entering into that story, it may serve us well to discuss some methodological issues that arose while writing this article, indeed, issues that have often not resolved themselves long after the project was over.

¹I am using evangelical as an umbrella term for conservative Protestant, and usually distinctly U.S.-inspired theology that (1) recognizes the sole authority of the Bible as inspired; (2) recognizes the need for a personal conversion experience where one confesses Jesus as Lord; and (3) see it as a mandate from the Gospel of Matthew to evangelize others to arrive at the same confessional statement. Additionally, this evangelical subculture often includes social cultural and political ideas that tend to make this culture overwhelmingly conservative in its views. I have chosen not to use the term Pentecostal theology when describing the gender issue because I have not found any evidence that what leads Victory Outreach women to ascribe to these roles has any links to distinctly Pentecostal notions of the agency of the Holy Spirit.

What I chronicled in my fieldwork and interviews with Victory Outreach fits into a category that folklorist Elaine Lawless found in her work with Oneness Pentecostal women in the Midwest. Lawless notes: "Spiritual life stories enable us to assume that these very specific life stories . . . are, in fact, not perfected entities, but rather each is a collection, a pastiche of stories; many of them based on both personal experience and traditional expectations at the same time."² Essential to understanding spiritual life stories is that they are compilations—testimonials that convey the sincerity of personal conversion experience and are often replete with supernatural events. Because orality plays such a critical role in Pentecostalism—as history and as worship—orality is the chief source of transmission of the faith. Lawless' comments on testimony and describes its crucial nature:

Pentecostals tell and re-tell their personal encounter stories, constantly reaffirming that a spiritual encounter did, in fact, take place. Within the context of the Pentecostal religion, the group members in the religious service create a very collective, perhaps even communal way, an appropriate story of a spiritual encounter, molding and recreating the story, telling and re-telling it only cautiously by adding or subtracting elements, until not only is an "appropriate" conversion story created for all to draw upon for their own personal "testimony," but a story that in fact, actually prescribes the conversion experience of future initiates.³

Analyzing Lawless' work and adding the work of oral historian Roxanne Rimstead, I want to describe what I think these narratives are and how mediating their transmission to text, ordering their reception, and being a participant observer in many of the rituals served for building what Rimstead calls in "social coalition." What these narrators divulged in their time with me comprise mediated performances of spiritual life stories that, in a sense, I have collected and transmitted to a larger audience. Rimstead describes the process: "They speak through mediated forms that restage an original performance during which a writer/listener recorded, transcribed, prompted, collected, edited, ordered, or maybe even inspired the utterances of 'ordinary' people."⁴

²Elaine Lawless, "Rescripting Their Lives and Narratives: Spiritual Life Stories of Pentecostal Women Preachers," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (Spring 1991) 2:58–9.

³Elaine Lawless, "The Night I Got the Holy Ghost: Holy Ghost Narratives and the Pentecostal Conversion Process," *Western Folklore* (January 1988) 11–12.

⁴Roxanne Rimstead, "Mediated Lives: Oral Histories and Cultural Memory," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 60 (Winter 1996) 141.

Indeed, as much as I attempted to recast the questions so as to elicit answers that did not rely on supernatural explanations, the narrators rarely, if ever, cooperated with my desire to represent them in a neat, linear fashion where they would offer "intellectually" appropriate answers to complex questions on religion and ethnicity. When many of my narrators questioned my motives and, more often than not, asked me if I was a Christian, they in effect were subverting the process—away from the clinical, often sterile environs of ethnography, toward testimony. Testimony not in the oral history sense of the world, but infused with evangelical connotations that they were telling me about the miraculous work of God—and that was for them, the truth I needed to hear.

There is little doubt in my mind that all my narrators, once they found out that I was a Christian (that usually means an evangelical Protestant), became more willing to tell me their stories, divulging their "dark nights of the soul"—more so than if an outsider had interviewed them. Nevertheless, the apprehension I felt about being self-revelatory became a concern when approached by a church member who wondered aloud how one "could be a believer and be analytical." I assured her that I could be both, but I am sure that the question resonated with other church members as much as it does with some in the academy. Certain that my role as a "sister" afforded me extraordinary access to Victory Outreach, the results of the social coalition that church members and I built together follows. The coalition that my narrators and I built operates on different levels. Though I am certain that church members wanted their narratives used to proclaim the certainty of their faith, I have transmitted their oral histories, and reordered them not to make a point about faith, but to argue for the creation and the re-creation of a Latino Pentecostal identity. On one level, these "ordinary" people have begun to build their private sacred memories, and through the process of oral tradition, testimonial writing, and pseudo-hagiographic approach to their church's founding have brought history into the realm of public memory that all church members can share. It is to this history that we now return.

In 1967, Cruz "Sonny" Arguinizoni, a former drug addict turned Pentecostal minister, purchased a house in the Boyle Heights section of Los Angeles. Through his first vision, "East L.A. for Jesus," Arguinizoni sought to carve out a familial, cultural, and religious space for addicts, gang members, ex-convicts, and the homeless. The need for a Pentecostal social mission to drug addicts was pioneered by Assemblies of God minister David Wilkerson. Wilkerson's ministry, Teen Challenge, attempted to build relationships between the Church and teenagers

that in today's parlance would be called at-risk youth. Teen Challenge served as a template for Victory Outreach.

David Wilkerson was working in Pennsylvania when he read of the ongoing youth gang problems in New York. He reported receiving a prophetic word from God about these youth: "they could begin life all over again, with fresh and innocent personalities of newborn children . . . they could be surrounded by love instead of hate and fear."⁵ Wilkerson began his ministry in Brooklyn, New York, in the early 1960s and worked in the most crime-ridden sections of the city. He established a parachurch organization with close ties to the Assemblies of God called Teen Challenge. One of his first converts was Nicky Cruz, a native of Puerto Rico and an active gang member. Wilkerson began organizing his ministry to at-risk youth at the Teen Challenge Center:

It would be a headquarters for a dozen or more full-time workers who shared my hopes for the young people around us, who saw their wonderful potential and their tragic waste. Each worker would be a specialist: One would work with boys from the gangs, another with boys that were addicted to drugs; another would work with parents. . . . There would be women workers; some would specialize in girl gangs members, others with addiction. . . . They would live in an atmosphere of discipline and affection. They would participate in our worship and our study. They would watch Christians living together, working together, and they would be put to work themselves. It would be an induction center where they were prepared for a life in the Spirit.⁶

Wilkerson's mission statement may be taken as a blueprint for the future mission of Victory Outreach. Recovering addicts and gang members, among others, are separated by gender in rehabilitation homes and ministered to by people who have experienced the same addictions and legal entanglements. Unlike those associated with Teen Challenge, the evangelists in Victory Outreach would generally be from the same background as their flock. Also, Victory Outreach began to organize its evangelism teams around the rehabilitation/reentry homes and around special teams like "Barrios for Christ," a team that targets high-profile gang areas. Teen Challenge provided Victory Outreach with a method to organize time at the homes. The schedule for Teen Challenge New York followed this routine:

⁵David Wilkerson, *The Cross and the Switchblade* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1963) 60.

⁶*Ibid.*, 129.

The rising bell was at 7:00 a.m.
 Breakfast at 7:30, followed by clean-up.
 Devotions until 9:30.
 Chapel 9:30-11:30, followed by lunch at noon.
 Clean-up and prayer until 2:00 p.m. when center residents went out for
 outreach or street evangelism until 7:30 p.m.
 Evening service till midnight.⁷

As will be discussed later, Victory Outreach rehabilitation and re-entry homes operate on much the same premise: (1) to inculcate the Pentecostal faith with constant prayer and worship; (2) to keep recovering addicts, gang members, and others busy with activities that both reinvent their faith lives and reintegrate them back into societal norms of work and rest cycles. Routinization helps people in recovery establish patterns of behavior that they became accustomed to before prison, at work, at school, or with family.

This separation from society also serves another function, according to anthropologist Luther Gerlach, who writes on the nature of Pentecostal organizations. These organizations set the participant apart from the established order, "it cuts him off from past patterns of behavior and often from past associations. It involves him with movement participants, and provides high motivation for changed behavior and for striving to accomplish group and movement objectives."⁸ How does this organizational structure of the center/home, borrowed from Teen Challenge, reorient Victory Outreach members? It does much the same way Teen Challenge does. Pentecostalism's ritual life reorients a convert first to the possibility that a divine force "saved" them from their previous circumstances to the certainty that such salvation is only possible through a relationship with Jesus and that recidivist behavior can be tempered by an active seeking of the Spirit. Anthropologist Thomas Csordas describes this as a transformation of time where "routines involving the organization of time include periodic events such as weekly prayer meetings, periodic seminars and courses, retreats, workshops, 'days of renewal,' and annual regional or national conferences."⁹ All these events are utilized at Victory Outreach, not only to inculcate a Pentecostal identity, but to plant a specific vision of the church as unique in its role as a drug rehab ministry.

⁷Ibid., 160.

⁸Luther P. Gerlach. "Pentecostalism: Revolution or Counterrevolution?" *Religious Movements in Contemporary America*, ed. Irving I. Zaretsky and Mark P. Leone (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974) 682-83.

⁹Thomas Csordas, *Language, Charisma, and Creativity: The Ritual Life of a Religious Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 72.

Wilkerson believed that the Holy Spirit restored people to life, healing them of their addictions without using medication. Like Teen Challenge, Victory Outreach's program for drug rehabilitation used no medication, allowed no smoking, and relied on prayer to help cure the addict. Another important component, part of inculcating self-respect and discipline, was that the Teen Challenge center, like the Victory Outreach rehab/reentry homes, requires residents to work. Victory Outreach has also imitated Teen Challenge's daily regimen of communal breakfast, morning prayer, study, work, and afternoon street evangelism or outreach.¹⁰ Along with replicating many of Teen Challenge's programs, Victory Outreach added the crucial component of insisting that addicts minister to each other. Arguinzoni took it a step further and made sure that the future leaders of the church came up from the ranks of the converted, making the church a self-perpetuating entity.

Through a mutual acquaintance, Sonny Arguinzoni became a rehabilitated person and a Pentecostal. Working together with Nicky Cruz, Arguinzoni joined the staff of Teen Challenge, but by 1967 he left to form his own church, one where addicts would minister to each other, one that would be founded in East Los Angeles, and, as it is today, a ministry that is 90 percent Latino.¹¹ From the beginning Arguinzoni's motivation, aside from the deeply spiritual influence of conversion, has been guided by his own self-consciousness at being a former drug addict; the shame of that stigma propelled him to begin Victory Outreach. He describes an incident that shaped his ideas about his ministry:

I went to my mother's church [after converting] and when they saw the son of Sister Arguinzoni, her drug addict son, all the women got hold of their pocketbooks and moved their daughters away from me. . . . That offended me. I wasn't a thief or a drug addict anymore! Jesus Christ had changed my life! People need a church where the pastors came from their same background. People need a congregation where they don't have to be so sophisticated, but instead can come in and feel at home. People need a church where they could just be themselves and worship the Lord in Spirit and in truth.¹²

¹⁰Arlene M. Sánchez Walsh, Fieldnotes, La Puente Men's Home, May 11, 1998.

¹¹When examining the homes, pastoral leadership, and surveying large-scale events like conferences, Latinos dominate in leadership and congregation demographics. For example, there were only 66 non-Latino home directors out of the 243 homes. Of the 139 English-speaking U.S. churches, only 23 have non-Latino pastors. 103 churches are located in the southwest, in predominantly Latino urban areas; there are 75 in California alone. All 26 Spanish-speaking churches are led by Latinos. See *Victory Outreach Handbook*, 1998, and their website www.victoryoutreach.org for a breakdown of the number of churches.

¹²Sonny Arguinzoni, *Internalizing the Vision* (La Puente, Calif.: Victory Outreach Publications, 1995) 35-36.

Probably no sentiment defines Victory Outreach as much as this statement. The idea that this ministry stands alone with the dispossessed and prefers it that way is its imprimatur, and that signals the creation of a unique Latino Pentecostal identity—one where social location is paid particular attention under the rubric of evangelical Christianity.

In order for the program of rehabilitation and church to work, Arguinizoni needed to devise a plan to reorient the addict away from the routinized pathologies of “lying around the house shooting up drugs for kicks.”¹³ Spiritually, Victory Outreach sacralized time—removing its characteristic of something to be wasted—to something of great value. Personal time as well as organizational time needed to be reoriented toward the sacred. The Pentecostal experience that Victory Outreach used as a healing mechanism for addiction became one of many ways in which the rehabilitative process became Pentecostal. In doing so, it created a religious identity.

For the recovering addict who sought help at Arguinizoni’s fledgling ministry, Pentecostalism served at least two purposes. First, it was the healing mechanism that might cure addiction; second, it became the regulating force of their social lives. Arguinizoni describes such an occurrence: “It [conversion] meant establishing new and orderly patterns for living with your family. . . . As a Christian, the former addict suddenly recognized his responsibility of being a husband and father and a conscientious employee.”¹⁴ Themes of miraculous healing abound in Victory Outreach testimonials that place the church squarely in the Pentecostal ethos of recovery. Victory Outreach’s Pentecostalism became a road for many to the therapeutic nature of evangelical Christianity. Equating evangelical religion and recovery, historian R. Marie Griffith’s study of “Women’s Aglow” provides some insights into the process. Griffith says that themes of recovery are so prevalent in evangelical religion because both stress surrender of one’s life.¹⁵ The extent to which a supernatural event receives credit for curing addiction, repairing relationships, and healing abused people demonstrates one of the ways one becomes a “new creation”; Victory Outreach requires one to become sensitive to the leading of the Spirit.

Negotiating life through the dichotomous prism that Pentecostalism offers is made easier by defining parameters: what is good/evil, godly/ungodly, and acceptable/unacceptable behavior. Often these

parameters are defined and redefined by the church members themselves. John,* a rehab resident, offers some insight into why the spiritual support he receives from the church is crucial to his recovery.

John says that he cannot leave the rehab home, he cannot leave the church because the “enemy” is always ready to take his life. John fears sliding back into drugs, alcohol, and a life of crime. John feels that he can function only through the structured environment of the rehab home. What John has recreated is a religious identity wedded to a larger narrative of this particular ministry—that this ministry, its homes, and its leadership are essential to keeping one’s sobriety and possibly one’s salvation. What appears to occur at the rehabilitation homes is the reestablishment of a ritual life that sacralizes lives in disorder. More so than providing order and belief, Victory Outreach’s organization and leadership ritualizes people to reintegrate them back into mainstream society.

Gerlach’s study of Pentecostal organizations can be applied to Victory Outreach: the church is reticulate in nature, it is a network of cell groups tied into loose and informal networks—home groups and Bible studies. This type of organization provides effective communication and logistical financial support. Ideologically, the group provides vision and overarching themes of a future presented in symbolic, easily communicated terms. Gerlach notes that Pentecostal ideology sets up an oppositional idea that makes a participant unite against an opposition: i.e., a dissenting church member, temptations from the “enemy” must be opposed. Gerlach notes that opposition offers a basis for a commitment process and a force against which to unite. In effect, converts have gone through the physical process of conversion through the process of the rehab homes, but as they proceed through the spiritual process of conversion by attending Bible studies, going to church, and partaking of ministerial roles, converts become imbued with the single-minded notion of their mission.¹⁶

The rehabilitation home serves as an entry-level initiation to the church and to a grass roots Pentecostalism used to proclaim a fervent evangelical message to troubled people. The homes are usually located in inner-city neighborhoods and, depending on the stage of the church’s development, either serve as a rehabilitation/church/parsonage, rehabilitation/church, or may strictly serve as a rehab/reentry home. The difference between rehab and reentry homes is that reentry represents and advanced stage where the recovering person may work and make further progress in order to reenter society. There are 171 rehabilitation

¹³ Sonny Arguinizoni, *God’s Junkie* (Los Angeles: Victory Outreach, 1967) 152–53.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ R. Marie Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 38.

* All names marked with an asterisk have been changed for confidentiality.

¹⁶ Gerlach, “Pentecostalism,” 681.

homes and 25 reentry homes in the United States.¹⁷ Once established, the rehab home is organized similarly regardless of its relationship to the home church. The supervising pastor relies on the home director to run the daily activities of the home; often the director will empower a reliable resident to be the assistant. How one becomes an assistant or a director remains a highly subjective decision based on the guiding philosophy of the founder:

Don't make the same mistake I almost made. Don't wait for the right one who is already polished or who has already been trained. If you do, you will bypass the ones that Jesus has selected—because you are put off by their raw character and style. They may look raw. Their style may seem a bit rough. So we pass them by and don't take notice that God has laid his hand on their lives.¹⁸

The educational levels of the directors do not matter—in keeping with the philosophy of the church, they seek to find “treasures out of darkness.” The home director, like any staff at home, is a volunteer. Titles are given to engender a sense of pride among the residents. The only compensation the director and residents receive is free room and board. In smaller congregations, pastors live at the home and sometimes serve as directors. Nicky Cruz, a Victory Outreach confidante, describes the initial rehab experience:

All illegal drugs and alcohol are taken away. Any money and their driver's licenses are retained by the staff for a month. For the first couple of weeks, all contact with the outside is handled through the program director's office. . . . The first three months concentrate on spiritual and physical healing. No medications are used. . . . They are taught responsibility, discipline and submission to authority. Then, as a participant progresses . . . [they] are expected to get and keep jobs.¹⁹

The rehab program usually lasts between nine months to a year. Within the home organization residents receive counseling, prayer, and moral support. Residents make an implicit contract with the church that, as a part of the rehabilitation process, they will participate in the activities of the home, raising money, attending Church functions, and engaging in street evangelism.

Once the resident decides to stay, the process begins. During the first two crucial weeks in a rehab house, they are searched for drugs

¹⁷ 1998 *Victory Outreach Handbook*.

¹⁸ Arguinzoni, *Internalizing*, 55.

¹⁹ Nicky Cruz, *Give Me Back My Dignity* (La Puente, Calif.: Victory Outreach Publications, 1995) 194.

and restricted from using the telephone and accepting visitors. Concurrently, the reparative work of the ritual life is slowly put into motion. The first two weeks, according to Miriam,* can be brutal. As a woman enters the home, the staff prays over her as she undergoes the difficult process of withdrawal. Encouraged to pray, she is introduced to the Christian practice of laying on of hands. Sometimes Miriam says the person is “kicking” heroin or alcohol “cold turkey,” without the benefit of medication. During this time, she is not permitted contact with outsiders because she may attempt to contact drug contacts, gang friends, or family who will try to get her out of the house.²⁰ While she stays at home, she must abide by the strict rules of the home: no television, no working outside the home, three to five hours of prayer/Bible study daily, required attendance at church functions, and a daily set of chores. Disruptive behavior leads to probation, and if the behavior is severe enough she will be expelled.²¹

Next she joins with others in the home to engage in street evangelism and begins testifying at church meetings. It is assumed and probably a certainty that by this time she has converted. The first two weeks also introduce her to the idea that Pentecostalism has a powerful effect of changing lives and should be a faith that she would be comfortable with and comfortable sharing back in her neighborhood. The new converts continue to pray with fellow residents, commence Bible studies, and become immersed in the Pentecostal ritual life of the laying of hands, prayer for physical healing, and deliverance from drugs and other life-controlling issues. Occasionally the resident receives the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, which in Pentecostal theology is initially experienced by speaking in tongues. Other spiritual gifts are sought and often experienced by the residents, especially healing and prophetic words of knowledge.

With the initiatory stage complete, the teachings may change to include working on the person's character. The values these teachings aim to imbue include self-respect, dignity, and holiness. The second stage, the preparatory stage, prepares residents to enter the life of the church—as members, lay leaders, and pastors. For those who need further assistance, the reentry program is in place. Before examining the reentry program, certain characteristics of the first two stages of the rehab home bear close inspection under the guise of the creation of a ritual life. For this, we turn to Sherry's* narrative and the indispensable work of Pentecostal theological Dan Albrecht.

²⁰ Miriam, interview, La Puente, California, June 19, 1997 (tape recording).

²¹ *Ibid.*

Sherry came to the rehab home after years of drug abuse, spousal abuse, satanic worship, and several stints in juvenile and adult institutions. She reports having no religious background except nominal Catholicism. She says that she learned about Satan through her grandmother, who taught her how to read tarot cards. She also used Ouija boards and prayed against her abusive husband. "I began . . . worshipping Satan and it seemed like things started getting better. And I would literally pray against my ex-husband. I would sit down and draw the star and with the chants . . ." ²² Despite her attempts to rid herself of her problems, her then-husband continued to beat her and she continued to descend into drugs, prostitution, and eventually prison.

Sherry benefited from Victory Outreach's cooperative agreements with the court system that allows convicts to serve sentences for minor drug offenses at rehab homes. Before being ordered by the court to attend Victory Outreach's rehabilitation home, Sherry observed a few church meetings not intent on staying; in fact, she attended several church meetings high on drugs. Usually she did not join in when others worshiped; she reports running out of the church after being frightened by the display of people praying in tongues, only to return when a person comforted her in the parking lot.

A turning point came when her husband beat her again and she began to have a nervous breakdown. She drove away from her house hoping to drive recklessly enough to be taken to jail. She drove to church and met a woman who prayed for her and tried to lay hands on her; Sherry resisted and returned home. After several other episodes of violence and drug overdoses, Sherry reports a personal experience that convinced her to seek spiritual help. She said that she was saved from the grip of a supernatural attack in her house where an entity came toward her. As she stood underneath a picture of Jesus the entity left the house. A Victory Outreach pastor helped Sherry make the decision to enter the home shortly thereafter. She calls the home a "sanctuary" from the vicious beatings she received from her husband. However, Sherry was not ready for the discipline of the home. "I didn't like black people, because I got brutally hurt by a couple of black people one time." ²³ Afraid to face her own prejudices, Sherry did not want to live with African Americans. Prayer, surrendering to the house rules, and, for Sherry, surrendering her life to God helped her reorganize her life.

Sherry's life consisted of searching for drugs, hiding from her husband, and engaging in occult practices for solace to her mounting difficulties. The home's schedule: morning prayer, communal break-

fast, Bible studies, chores, communal dinner, and numerous church activities all served to routinize time. From an existence with little regard to structure, Sherry was placed in a system that sacralized certain times of the day to be set aside for prayer and worship.

Prayer to a benevolent deity rather than a deity Sherry described as "evil" serves as a crucial restoration of ritual in Sherry's life. Instead of praying to this entity for protection, Sherry witnessed people praying for each other and with her. She came to the realization that her problems could not be solved by her occult religious activity. Theologian Albrecht states it well: "[the] priesthood of all believers [is] more practical in pentecostal/charismatic spirituality. . . . Believers, not clergy only, are expected to be involved in healing rites." ²⁴ Sherry explains that she was surprised to see people pray for her, a sign of concern and caring she had rarely seen in her life.

Because of her unfamiliarity with the Pentecostal experience of speaking in tongues, Sherry ran out of the service because the practice frightened her. Such rites of passage, according to Albrecht, require exposure in a ritualized setting (worship) before they are accepted. Albrecht also notes that Spirit baptism represents a crucial rite of passage in Pentecostal churches, second only to conversion. ²⁵ Sherry needed further exposure to worship, prayer, and finally the sanctuary of the rehab home before she could negotiate the passage from liminal spaces of drug addiction to the *communitas* of the home. To some extent, home residents like Sherry are still neophytes. Wellness, conversion, baptism, Spirit baptism, and evangelism are all steps that residents are reintroduced to on their way to the *communitas* of the church, where ex-gang members, recovering drug addicts, former prostitutes, and ex-convicts worship side-by-side with the rest of the community.

To grasp what this state of mind means, one needs to see it from the viewpoint of stepping from a liminal state to a *communitas* state as described by anthropologist Victor Turner. Keeping rules, regulations, worship, and fasting are all physical acts. Before physical actions can be sacralized one's inner life needs to be reoriented toward a sacred sense because that is what constitutes true conversion. Sherry needed to undergo a series of actions that separated her from her past.

Entering the home was a crucial step, getting prayed for was another—but her acknowledgment of her prejudiced feelings toward African Americans, among other inner conflicts, represents a transformative event that Pentecostals use to divide peoples' lives into pre-

²² Sherry, interview, La Puente, California, December 2, 1997 (tape recording).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Daniel E. Albrecht, "Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality: Looking Through the Lenses of Ritual" (Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 1993) 170.

²⁵ Ibid., 212.

and post-conversion periods. "Conversion radically reshapes life; one is truly Christian, when one is saved. One truly walks with the Lord when one surrenders their life and becomes so vulnerable that they can be touched in an almost supernatural way by God."²⁶ Before God "dealt" with Sherry, she remained on the outside. Before speaking in tongues, Sherry lived across the social boundaries of the Pentecostal rehab home culture, but when she awoke one day and reports speaking in a language she did not understand, the women of the rehab home laughed with her that she had "gotten the Spirit." The order of events is important because not only does it demonstrate Sherry's entrance into the Pentecostal ritual life, it reinforces religious orthodoxy and builds on the emergent Pentecostal identity. Again Albrecht notes: "The Pentecostal practices, the enactment of the rites, specifically, helps to raise the shared sense of community, a community that believes that its community is indelibly linked with the Spirit as it is with the sisters and brothers."²⁷ The home, its structure of time, insistence on prayer, and fasting for character development becomes the community at one with the Spirit. These individuals carry that sense of loyalty to their neighborhoods, families, and churches.

Sherry experienced other manifestations that contributed to her growing religious identity and helped her in a practical way. Sherry reports being illiterate upon entrance to the home. She felt ashamed and embarrassed to admit her illiteracy to the other women because she could not participate in Bible study. Until one day when "I [*sic*] opening up, the words just came out and then they [the women] started teaching me and dealing with me and praying with me that God would restore my mind . . . and sure enough . . . I could remember, I could recite."²⁸ She credits God with giving her sufficient reading ability to be able to perform rites critical to integrating herself into society. The restoration of her learning abilities not only made her participation in Bible study possible, she believes it made her future life as a secretary in a local church possible. After over a year in rehab and reentry, Sherry found work as a receptionist. She continues to hold that job to this day. In addition, she sings in the choir and is involved with several church ministries including the music, gang, and prison ministries.

Pentecostals often reenter the world after worship "accompanied by their altered understanding of reality and with the experience of the ritual in order, to affect their world. A kind of spill over, a transcending

of the ritual space must take place."²⁹ What makes Victory Outreach unique is its singular vision to take a newly ritualized life back to the neighborhoods, prisons, and gangs, to take part in church building and reaffirming what Latino Pentecostal theologians like Eldin Villafañe say is a social ethic built upon recognition of ethnic identity and social location, rather than subsuming such factors to an amorphous American evangelical identity.

Victory Outreach members accomplish this ritualized life in much the same way as most Pentecostals do, with few exceptions. Upon graduating from the rehab home, residents may leave and continue their life outside the church, but a significant portion of graduates choose to stay and become active participants in church ministries. Rather than reentering life outside the church, converts like Sherry continue the ritualized life as church employees. They chose to counteract the ills of society by building up the ministry rather than working in society. In effect, they chose not to join the mainstream because they believe it to be hopelessly corrupt.

Victory Outreach members like Joe* are on a mission. A maintenance man at a local business, Joe has held that job for over a year. He was converted by another ministry over eight years ago, but as Joe describes it: "I started going to an Assemblies of God church, but, it was like . . . where it was an all-white church with . . . elderly . . . I was going around eight months, but I wasn't able to stay, I ended up falling away; [I got] back involved in the same stuff."³⁰ His drug use and other illegal activities sent him back to jail for a year. During that stay he heard about a noted gang leader who had been converted through the ministry of Victory Outreach.

To a large extent Victory Outreach is composed of recovering addicts, former gang members, and others like Joe himself, a former gang member and recovering addict. When he found a church that reflected his life experience and provided him with the community of the home, Joe transferred his Pentecostal faith and identity over to a church that fortified his ethnic identity and life experience.

Joe needed a support system within a community of believers. Reentry homes facilitate the need for community and character development, and prepares people like Joe for a life in church ministry. Inculcating value for work, ethical living, and traditional family structures occur with consistent exposure to Bible studies and discipleship led by home directors and overseers. By accepting these values and acting upon them as the "proper" way to life, Joe became convinced that

²⁶ Ibid., 151-2.

²⁷ Ibid., 269.

²⁸ Sherry, interview.

²⁹ Albrecht, "Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality," 166.

³⁰ Joe, interview, La Puente, California, May 22, 1997 (tape recording).

conversion equaled social mobility and resulted in inward and outward healing. "Once Christ came into my life, I am able to hold a job. . . . I came in, you know, stuttering and now God's doing that, healing. . . . I have hope now; I have a future and it's in ministry where I just want to reach my potential."³¹

Coming from a life spent in jails and addicted to PCP, Joe appears genuinely grateful for the ministry. Through the urging of his home supervisors he has enrolled in the church's Bible school (Victory Outreach School of Ministry) in hopes of becoming a pastor. Before that, Joe wants to start his own support group for abused men. He believes that he can reach hurting men and that his ministry will prove crucial to fixing broken homes. He especially wants to reach out to men "because of the importance of the father in the home. . . . The father in the home is the priest of the home, . . . the leader. That is the way God has made the home. . . . If the man is not there, there is a breakdown and the woman doesn't take the role. . . . God's called the man to lead the home."³²

Coupled with generous doses of evangelical theology and Pentecostal spirituality, the rehab homes not only help residents reorient space and time through organizing nearly every hour of their day, but it also helps solidify personal mores, ethics, and implants ideological musings that help construct social identities, occasionally leading to overt political action. One of the more explicit reorientations occurs with the very nature of what the rehab homes are structured to do: produce virtuous men and women, one to be a productive worker, the latter to be a traditional wife and mother.

Traditional readings of certain biblical verses (Eph 5:22; 1 Cor 14:34; Col 3:18; and 1 Tim 2:12) that explicitly mention the roles of men and women privilege the submission of women to men regarding familial concerns. Though there are probably practical and financial reasons for the lack of women's reentry homes (there are only two, while men have seventeen), it seems fair to speculate that the religious attitudes about women's places in family life prefer that women stay at home while men work. Since the reentry home requires residents to find jobs, there appears to be no need for women to engage in such training. Reentry also appears to be a step available to more men because it is seen as a pathway to fulltime ministry. Because there exist few pastoral roles for women in the church, and because jobs are viewed as a means of sustenance rather than careers for women, the lack of reentry homes for women is not an aberration, but rather, a part of the process of incul-

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

cating a religious identity that insists upon "responsibility, discipline, and submission to authority."³³

Sometimes, when that authority is perceived as crossing certain moral boundaries, Victory Outreach women have taken their statements of their new-found faith to the streets. Cruz included this rare episode of direct political involvement in his book:

Rehab resides found themselves involved politically in an important school board election [in New York City]. At stake were hundreds of Christian parents who had decided to run for office to help turn the tide in the city's notorious schools . . . and to get rid of the noxious Rainbow Curriculum, designed to teach small children that homosexuality is an acceptable option, not a sinful lifestyle. Going door-to-door, handing out brochures for Christian candidates, Coney Island rehab women were happy to help their pastor . . . by passing out . . . literature.³⁴

It might be speculation to say that rehab homes also shape political ideology because little is known of the residents' pre-conversion politics. People, possibly predisposed to conservative social and political views, find further reinforcement for their politics and/or begin to find their political voice in the church. We shall revisit this idea later with an examination of Art Blajos' *Blood In, Blood Out*, for clues to how rehab life may or may not have the potential to reshape the political views of its inhabitants. For now, we should continue to examine the role of women beyond rehab to their role in the church.

It is my contention that what is occurring in the rehab homes is a parallel application of social and political values that shape a brand of Latino Pentecostal identity. On one plane, through the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, the church supports the age-old idea of what a woman's place is in U.S. Latino culture; on the other plane, it supports standard evangelical readings on women's roles. So, in effect, to become Pentecostal means to experience a transformative spiritual event that grafts you onto a larger worldview, but it also allows you to support a male-dominant Latino culture.

The roles most women play in Victory Outreach, acting as stewards for the auxiliary ministries and organizing fundraisers, differs little from other Pentecostal churches. Most Pentecostal organizations, which historically have made room for women as pastors, preachers, evangelists, have had a tendency to relegate women outside the centralized authority of the church. Recovering women in Victory Outreach find themselves entering a community of like-minded women who have

³³ Cruz, *Give Me Back My Dignity*, 194.

³⁴ Ibid.

often come from similar situations. Although sociologist Joan Moore's work does not deal with Victory Outreach, her work on Latina gang members provides a portrait of their marginalization within the larger Latino society.

Moore studied fifty-one Latina gang members in Los Angeles. Forty-one percent of them used heroin at one time or another, compared to 70 percent of men. Moore notes that "gang women who became involved with heroin had been largely confined to a street-oriented world throughout their lives."³⁵ Around 10 percent grew up in homes active in the drug trade. Latina heroin addicts who were active a generation ago tended to take one of three routes. More than a third became "street people" immersed in the heroin lifestyle. The rest were less intensely involved with the street lifestyle. They tended to alternate between dependence on a man—for their heroin supply and for protection, as well as for daily sustenance—or on their gang homeboys or homegirls. All these women, Moore writes, are outside the traditional boundaries of Mexican American family life. These girls are "bad" because of gang affiliation and most certainly sank lower in the eyes of their families because of their drug use and even further if they became prostitutes.³⁶ If Moore asked any questions about religious affiliation, she did not include them in her otherwise helpful study. Nevertheless, Moore demonstrates how Latina gang members are ostracized from traditional Latino families, seek acceptance in gangs and on the streets, and often find themselves in ministries like Victory Outreach. Ironically, the fact that very few of these women came from such traditional families does not deter Victory Outreach from reorienting these women to traditional, often idealized versions of family and home life.

Victory Outreach women create a spiritual community within the homes and churches, and they become reinvigorated by annual meetings meant to accomplish several things: encourage new spiritual practices, create social space for them in ministry, and encourage and reinforce the idea that they are special. Chosen to perform tasks so central to the mission of the church, they represent the mothers of the new church and are charged with mission work and with keeping the vision of the church pure.

Such ideas hearken back to well-worn notions of the idealization of feminine piety and an assurance that alleged female spiritual superior-

³⁵ Joan Moore and John Hagedorn, "What Happens to Girls in the Gang?" *Gangs in America*, 2d ed., C. Ronald Huff (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1996) 207.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 208. Moore's sample of adults were interviewed in 1986–1987. As teenagers the women were active in gangs as far back as the 1950s and half were active in 1970s.

ity nurtures female moral authority. We should briefly break here to examine the historic ties evangelicals have to these ideas and how they operated in the context of a very different organization, the nineteenth-century home mission.

Evangelicals, according to historian Randall Balmer, more than any other group have perpetuated the notion that women are the protectors of the home through their superior lives. This idea has often kept women frozen in time in the nineteenth-century as virtuous homemakers and mothers.³⁷ The nineteenth-century female home missions agent sought to carve out, in many ways, a similar social and spiritual space as Victory Outreach cofounder Julie Arguinzone has claimed under an idea of spiritual superiority. In her examination of home missions women, historian Peggy Pascoe found that not only did women take advantage of the honorific title of the ideal Christian woman, they used their moral authority to break out of the tightly prescribed boundaries set for them by American society. To draw a parallel between Pascoe's home missions women and Victory Outreach, one need to look no further than the following observation: "Women's depictions of ideal Christian homes were accompanied by a bold critique of male behavior in the family. . . . They found fault with husbands who offered inadequate financial support . . . or did not restrain their sexual desires or their taste for alcohol, opium, or gambling."³⁸ While the critique of men's behavior may not be overt, Victory Outreach's emphasis on rehabilitation and reentry programs, along with their Promise Keepers-like organization "Mighty Men of Valor," suggests that critiques of men's overindulgent behavior is implied in the very structure of the church's mission. That the church rarely, if ever, sends out a single male to found a church and rehab home says much about the importance with which they view the traditional family. Julie Arguinzone provides the role model for the ideal Christian life and is the keeper of the church's vision.

Sister Julie's captivating preaching skills would make her one of the more explosive evangelists of the late twentieth-century Latino evangelical world if more people knew of her. However, in keeping with the idea of a role model, she has intentionally kept to her supporting role: dutiful wife and mother. When Sister Julie speaks to a women's meeting called "United Women in Ministry," she speaks with authority. Arguinzone begins her remarks with the story of Lot's wife in order to

³⁷ Randall Balmer, *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) 72.

³⁸ Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West 1874–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 37.

comment on what she sees as America's moral decline. She lashes out at the preeminence of gays and lesbians on television, Jerry Springer, and secular rock and roll music.

The title of Arguinzoni's speech is taken from Luke 17:32, where Jesus describes how to know that the kingdom of God is near. Because Lot's wife looked back on a destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, she was turned into a pillar of salt (Gen 19:23-26). She received this punishment because the angels who visited Lot warned him about the impending destruction of the cities and granted Lot's request that he and his family be allowed to flee. Her disobedience cost her life. Jesus' words in Luke suggest that because Lot's wife tried to preserve her life, she lost it. There are those who will miss the kingdom because they are disobedient.

Arguinzoni exhorts the women to make a difference. She preaches: "[We are] snatching the twilight treasures [prostitutes] right off the streets. Taking the needles right out of the arms of these girls and they're becoming women of God."³⁹ There are spiritual prices to pay for their ministry, therefore women must remain steadfast and prepare for sacrifice. Women, Arguinzoni says, need to be "faithful to the things you've been taught." Victory Outreach women have been refashioned into godly women ready to fulfill their traditional roles by acting like ladies, which means walking in high heels and dressing modestly.⁴⁰ Such a transformation prepares them to disciple other women and makes them better wives. Interviews and dozens of personal conversations support the idea that Sister Julie embodies the archtypical Victory Outreach woman. Despite her powerful position where she could most certainly guide the church by the sheer power of her persona, she does not. She defers to her husband. "It's easy to follow him. He's my leader, he's been my example, he's the one that fires us all up. He's the one that's been the forerunner in our family and I value that and I look at him as God's man . . . and yes he's not perfect . . . he's the closest that I know of on this earth to God."⁴¹ Arguinzoni positions herself in the place where all Victory Outreach women should be—following their leaders personified in the guise of husbands, pastors, and church leadership. Her near-deification of her husband solidifies the overarching supremacy of loyalty to the ministry that is the standard by which women and men are judged. It should be noted that in dozens of conversations with Victory Outreach women and in taped portions of their conventions, the deification process often turns to Sister Julie, affectionately referred to as "mom" by many women, and in one speech referred to as "mother of all nations."

³⁹ Julie Arguinzoni, "Remember Lot's Wife," speech at 1998 United Women in Ministry Convention (tape recording).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Examining several other speeches by women adds to the idea that meetings like this not only play a crucial role in the practical aspects of church growth, but demonstrate Julie's influence and, more importantly, reinforce the idea that they are different, they are called to be different because of what they have overcome. Victory Outreach women are also told that there are very few places where they can find acceptance. This church accepts you as you are; Sister Julie helps you as she has helped dozens of other women. Stacey Lewis, church evangelist, exclaims: "Normal church can't take us! . . . We don't care nothing about how you look."⁴² For recovering addicts and prostitutes (as Lewis describes herself), this is the sanctuary that becomes community.

Josey Pineda's speech discusses how the women now have a chance, as new creations, to break generational curses and leave a legacy of faith to their children. She acknowledges that many of the women are not from functional families, that they are not "Ozzie and Harriet." The inference being that because they have not known such idealized domestic existence, that should not deter them from trying to capture that idealized domestic tranquility. All one needs to do is look at Sister Julie, and look at Pineda herself, for examples of how to keep the church's vision and build families in accordance with evangelical principles, rarefied through a newly acquired religious worldview.⁴³

Historian R. Marie Griffith's work analyzing evangelical women and the power of submission makes an intriguing yet controversial argument that such submission serves as an empowering tool for women in movements like Victory Outreach. I would like to meld her arguments and the arguments of anthropologist Elizabeth Brusco, who examined the reformation of machismo in Colombia to make the case that Pentecostalism, when pursued as a reformatory faith, becomes powerfully enabling. Examining "Women's Aglow Fellowship," a largely Euro-American group in the northeast, Griffith's insights into Pentecostal women are critical to understanding the power women find in this faith. Women's spiritual empowerment emanates from their ability to heal themselves and their families. At Victory Outreach, if women do not already know their need to submit to men, they learn such things through the homes or in the church.

For Griffith, submission becomes grounded in recovery discourse—the subtext of evangelical faith that makes religion another form of therapy. Confessional and cathartic, conversion or rededication to God relies on the person being able to throw off the old self. Griffith says

⁴² Stacey Lewis, untitled speech at 1998 United Women in Ministry Convention (tape recording).

⁴³ Josey Pineda, untitled speech at 1998 United Women in Ministry Convention (tape recording).

that this discourse is “grounded in notions of surrendering control over one’s life, learning to be vulnerable with others and with God in order to cultivate relationships of deeper intimacy.”⁴⁴ This process begins for women as they enter the rehab home or the church and they encounter people who are insistent that they pursue God and that their lives can be changed. The first step to that for Victory Outreach women lies in surrounding themselves with people who validate the idea and serve as examples that lives can change. One story in particular encapsulates the refashioning of traditional womanhood, resulting in immersion in evangelical Christianity that initiates women into a social and political value system.

Born in Los Angeles in 1962, Miriam spent half of her thirty-five years in and out of prisons. Before kicking her habit in rehab over three years ago, Miriam used heroin for eleven years. For two years she has been at the women’s home; she credits the ministry for saving her from more prison time. She needed the discipline of the program because of her rebelliousness, and she needed the “lessons on becoming more lady-like”—an effort, she believes, to reorient her from homosexuality.

A hard-looking woman with tattoos covering her arms, Miriam continues to fashion herself in the style of a Latina gang member. With a clear voice, heavily made-up face, and pressed pleated pants, Miriam discusses how living in the home and receiving religious instruction convinced her that there were “real” Christians, and that her struggles with drugs and her sexual orientation could be changed. The beginning of such corrective instruction begins with the implementation of strict rules and a chain of command meant to instill a sense of order. “You got to discipline yourself, self-control, learning how to pray, learning how to receive correction and orders which are hard. . . . [I] don’t like to be told what to do.”⁴⁵ Miriam seems to view her pre-conversion life as one of chaos—she received no religious instruction from her family even though her mother attended a Jehovah Witness church. Early in her teens Miriam began using drugs and running with a local gang in the San Gabriel Valley. She began spending time in prison for a variety of offenses. Though she met Victory Outreach ministers during her stints in prison, she ignored them. She became convinced that God was really trying to help her when, facing fifteen years in prison for assault; the corrections board at a local women’s prison decided to parole her to Victory Outreach and placed her on probation.

Her initial rehab stay was difficult. Miriam rebelled and says that there were many times where they could have kicked her out, but they

did not. When she arrived she wore a buzz cut and boxers underneath her pants. “I didn’t know nothing about bein’ female. I didn’t know nothing about wearing girl’s clothing. And in the home, they taught me, step-by-step, daily, how to let my hair grow. I never wore make-up in my life. I came in just totally looking the opposite of what I’ve become.”⁴⁶ Miriam credits Sister Julie for teaching her about clothing, make-up, and prayer, by which Miriam believes that her sexual orientation has been changed.

Miriam’s life in rehab changed two years ago when she no longer needed to remain there, but she decided to stay and become a helper at the home doing intakes, praying with women, laying hands on them, and leading Bible study. Of her own accord, Miriam cofounded the first support group for “ex-gays and lesbians” in Victory Outreach. The suspicious gazes made this endeavor all the more difficult. According to Miriam, fellow church members spoke behind the backs of group members and attempted to uncover the identity of members in this confidential group. Such intrusions did not bother Miriam. She was very open about her homosexual “past” and realized that the church was in denial about homosexuality in the church. Miriam believes that her small group (who met in a private residence) barely scratched the surface. Beginning a group like this might end whatever chances a resident has in choosing to minister in the church, but this is not the case for Miriam, who recently received a promotion and moved to the east coast to run her own women’s home. Adding Griffith’s idea and Miriam’s story to Brusco’s ideas on reforming machismo illuminates what role evangelical Christianity plays in transforming women’s lives. It helps to explain why, despite a lack of pastoral power, women find spiritual power in the church.

Brusco’s groundbreaking work examining Pentecostal women’s lives in Colombia stated that “Colombian evangelicalism reforms gender roles in a way that enhances female status.”⁴⁷ Brusco’s evidence for her statement she says is evident in the “ideology of evangelism” against aggression, violence, pride, and self-indulgence, and in describing how conversion to Pentecostalism rearranges gender roles in the family. Men begin to take an active role in the family, they stop being violent, stop drinking, and stop frequenting prostitutes. In short, “conversion entails the replacement of individualistic orientation in the

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Brusco, “The Reformation of Machismo: Asceticism and Masculinity Among Colombian Evangelicals,” *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America*, ed. Virginia Garrard-Burnett and David Stoll (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) 144.

⁴⁴ Griffith, *God’s Daughters*, 38.

⁴⁵ Miriam, interview.

public sphere with a collective orientation and identity in the home."⁴⁸ Brusco believes the benefits of ascetic living clearly benefit women. However, what happens when we look at Victory Outreach women when they become Pentecostal and live their lives as evangelicals with the attendant conservative social baggage?

Victory Outreach women who take an active role in the building of the ministry see their self-improvement and social mobility wholly in spiritual terms and tied inexorably to their conversion. Rehabilitation is a sacred experience that as much as it has "cleaned" them up, has become the only legitimate vehicle for social change. Careers are important as long as they support a lifestyle in concert with building the ministry and supporting a family. Women who go beyond such roles are singled out for being less than fully committed to the ministry. Victory Outreach's ability to be a self-perpetuating entity serves its members with opportunities for social mobility. Various modes include church workers with jobs, missionaries who travel, and married women who help run churches.

Ruth* did not become a Victory Outreach member via the rehabilitation home; she followed her husband into the church after he completed the program. She had worked in a variety of office jobs until she went into fulltime ministry with her husband. Revered as one of the most effective prayer leaders and preachers in the church, Ruth has gone from an unstable family life to a stable middle-class existence where she and her husband travel frequently as representatives of the church. As church planters they have founded half a dozen churches throughout the United States and abroad.

Having raised her seven siblings on her own, she found settling into marriage difficult because she was no longer responsible for others. Preparation for a traditional role as a wife required instruction from fellow Victory Outreach women who taught by example how to care for children and cope with the difficulties of married life. Raised Catholic, Ruth converted to Pentecostalism because she felt the need for a more personal religious experience. She left the office world and decided to take up babysitting to be closer to her ministry, despite her husband's pleas that she continue office work to help support the family.⁴⁹ For fifteen years Ruth has been a conference speaker, prayer leader, and women's ministry leader. Along with reinforcing the roles of women as wives and mothers, Ruth preaches to her group that they have the ability to overcome abuse, divorce, depression, and a host of other problems. She argues that they can help keep their kids out of trouble if they

provide good models, pray, and they can accomplish this without superseding their husband's role as head of the household.

A weekly women's Bible study guided her through the first five years of her marriage. Ruth brought her child as did other women, and it became a time to share their problems as well as receive religious instruction from the older women. Ruth explains:

God dealt with me in a lot of different areas in my life as a woman, as a wife, as a mother; you know, a lot of foundational principles were birthed there. . . . God was telling me that he was training me, but yet, I didn't want to face the fact that maybe we would go out and start a church, because that was too scary for me. But in my spirit, I know like this was a training ground 'cause God was giving me a pastor's heart at that point, where I was concerned for the people that were in our Bible studies. I mean I would literally counsel all day and not clean the house. And then I would have to unplug the phone at three before [my husband] got home so that I could clean the house.⁵⁰

As a part-time job, Ruth began babysitting to bring in additional income since her husband was not in fulltime ministry at that point. For a time she went back to work after she had her second child, but discovered that a career in a financial office did not fulfill her. She explains: "for a while, you know I got all caught up in the work thing, but then God began to deal with me and I would feel like I don't belong here."⁵¹ Ruth and her husband began fulltime ministry in 1984.

Ruth began by initiating a weekly prayer meeting at the mother church in La Puente. Like many first-time church planters, they used their home as a rehab home and held Bible studies there as well. To cope with the added responsibility of living with a dozen or so people, Ruth recalled the stories of hardship she heard from Sister Julie. "You know, a lot of my discipleship, a lot of my teaching was by observing. . . . I would soak it up and just learn and apply and I'd learn from their mistakes . . . the opportunities that I had to speak with Sister Julie they were always . . . encouraging even to this point."⁵² Today, Ruth is involved in the administration of a Los Angeles church and active in children's ministry. Part of her ministry involves helping single mothers prepare for ministry as well. She comments on her ministry:

They don't see no hope for themselves. They've been abused and torn apart mentally and emotionally. And I can see God building them. Giving them confidence, courage, boldness, that they could be something,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ruth, interview, Los Angeles, California, August 11, 1998 (tape recording).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

they could be that leader. They could be a good mother. . . . To me the women are like the wheel, you know . . . we may not be the leaders or the heads and that's okay because I don't want that anyway. I don't want the responsibility, but I'll help bring the task to pass . . . the women's ministry is very important as far as that's concerned so that married women will learn how to work with their husbands. . . . I feel that it's very important that the women learn to be the wife. Learn their role. Learn their place.⁵³

Furthermore, for Victory Outreach women, conflict with careers, individual self-fulfillment, and political power are subsumed under a religious context. If there exists one grand narrative reaffirmed in the church, it is that being free from drugs, alcohol, abusive relationships, or prostitution was not accomplished by any secular organization. Overwhelmingly, church members credit a supernatural experience with God for their sobriety, jobs, and reunified families. Evangelical Christianity, when partnered with practical services such as free rehab, counseling for domestic violence, and shelter for the homeless, certainly fits the traditional notions of progressive social services. In its own way, Victory Outreach provides choices and avenues to mobility as church builders.

For many evangelicals, the underlying causes of social ills are not systemic and institutional sexism, racism, or economic injustice—if they believed that their circumstances were caused by those ills before, conversion has reoriented their worldview to look to a supernatural agent for their troubles. The answer to societal ills for Victory Outreach members lies in the practical application of faith that rebuilds their lives and in turn builds the church. For, if enough inner-city people of color within the shout of a storefront Pentecostal church entertain thoughts of conversion, will it follow that their political ideologies will be changed? Is that an inevitable result of the re-creation of a Latino Pentecostal identity? As will be seen in the next section, the idea of a monolithic progressive Latino political consciousness free of spiritual impulses never existed. Indeed, for close to a century, classical Pentecostals (Assemblies of God), Pentecostal social missions (Victory Outreach), and more recently, charismatics (the Vineyard), have served as alternative vehicles for spiritual attainment and social service.

"In our times of desperate trouble, today's unchurched will accept help from Christians—often warily and usually after the welfare system and the courts have failed them."⁵⁴ Victory Outreach members remain wary of the governmental approach to solving social problems because

they have little hope in institutional remedies. Founder Arguinzoni spent time in a federal rehabilitation hospital and Miriam candidly reveals that her years in prison did nothing to cure her heroin addiction: "[They give you] no treatment . . . they treat you like a dog."⁵⁵ Church members' lack of confidence in government only deepens as converts become convinced that government programs can never solve their problems. Paramount in the newly ritualized life of the convert and the established church member alike is the evangelical idea that outside of Jesus, there is no salvation. Thus, theological exclusivity becomes another aspect of what social values become privileged in church. For Victory Outreach, what began as a private conversion becomes a public crusade because of the desire to see people convert and an understanding that church members' private behavioral transformation can and should be transmitted to the larger society. One example stands out as an effective portrayal of the fervency with which church members wear this new shield of faith.

Art Blajos is a self-described former hitman for the California prison gang known as the Mexican Mafia. His book, *Blood In, Blood Out*, describes his journey through the correctional facilities of California, from boys' homes to San Quentin. Blajos is blunt in his depiction of jail life and critical of the society that feeds such institutions. Blajos' book, co-written by Christian author Keith Wilkerson, represents an interesting mix of confessional literature, social commentary, and evangelism. Blajos, while aware, has little positive comment on the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s. Blajos says that he was too busy chasing women to become involved in the politics of the times.⁵⁶ Critical of the governmental agencies who housed and cared for him, he appears interested in neither social policy nor social reform.

"The State of California had raised me, fed me, housed me, and clothed me since I was a mere boy, and now it wanted to kill me."⁵⁷ Blajos notes that the state failed to change his behavior, failed to cure his heroin addiction, and when he was on trial for capital murder, finally decided that killing him was the only remedy.

Blajos' childhood represented an endless shuffle from relative to relative before he and his brother ended in a boys' home. Two young Euro-American youth taught him that being a gang member was the only way to gain respect. Blajos sought to imitate their dress and mannerisms, and he had already adopted the gang lifestyle and began abusing drugs when he was sent to live with an aunt. "On my first day

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Arguinzoni, *Internalize the Vision*, 12–13.

⁵⁵ Miriam, interview.

⁵⁶ Art Blajos, *Blood In, Blood Out* (Crowborough, East Sussex: Monarch, 1996) 24.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 14.

at this new school, I quickly got the message: I was poor, I was behind academically, and I was the wrong race."⁵⁸ The next section of the book represents a rambling social commentary of the "true" causes of social ills. Blajos writes that while growing up, he did not watch the news or read "social commentary." It may be fair to assume that Blajos was uninterested in current events, and if Blajos was apolitical in his pre-conversion stance something occurred during the time that he has become Pentecostal. I would suggest that heavy doses of socially conservative theology have altered Blajos' perception of blame and responsibility regarding social problems. Blajos' politics are clearly represented in the following quote:

Suddenly, it was cool to be part of an ethnic minority struggling against poverty and prejudice and injustice. The American Civil Liberties Union was rushing into place court decisions that were tying the hands of civil authorities. . . . President Johnson's "Great Society" and his War on Poverty poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into the hands of anybody who could claim to help the disadvantaged or oppressed.⁵⁹

Blajos blames ineffectual progressive government programs and meddling activists for a chaotic society; both these complaints resonate today within conservative circles. Like other conservatives, Blajos lays blame for the permissiveness of today's society on moral relativism. "We were raised being told that everything is gray—no absolute white absolute black. Nothing completely right or wrong. Textbooks are praised if they were values free—taking no position on good or evil."⁶⁰ The removal of prayer from the public schools underlies this values-free society. "At the same time that prayer and Bible reading were banned from the public schools, an assault began from the other side."⁶¹ The other side remains undefined, but it is safe to assume that it has something to do with the "enemy." Fear of the "enemy" among some evangelicals is so pervasive that any institutions not prominently displaying a Christian God; particularly schools or other government offices, become suspect because of their alleged secular foundations. Institutions are either at best morally ambivalent, or at worst godless and evil.

Blajos' choice for sources also illuminates his changing political ideology. Columnist William Buckley, author William Bennett, and economist Michael Novack figure prominently in Blajos' writing. Blajos

quotes Buckley's comments to *Forbes* magazine in 1995: "I hate to say it, but I feel the need to acknowledge the quiet triumph of secularism in the past thirty years."⁶² Blajos goes on to explain secularism as the "removal of religion from American life." Blajos quotes Bennett's critique of popular culture: "[Making] a virtue of promiscuity, adultery, homosexuality, and gratuitous acts of violence . . . many of our most successful and critically-acclaimed movies celebrate brutality, casual cruelty, and twisted sex."⁶³ Echoing an oft-heard refrain, Blajos takes full responsibility for his actions: "Just because American society was disintegrating around me as I entered childhood and became a teen is no excuse for my behavior. I still had the ability to say no. But I did not."⁶⁴ Personal moral failings, not systemic social ills, are blamed for the loss of social cohesion in American society.

After this section Blajos returns to a discussion of his time in California's prisons. Aside from the graphic depiction of prison life, Blajos the evangelist continues to preview his conversion event. Before this event Blajos continues to discuss the racism he felt and how prison life heightened his own racism. Blajos describes his racial intolerance of African Americans upon leaving prison and how "all become racists in prison." He became a member of the Mexican Mafia because he viewed it as instant respect—it gave him an alternative to a powerless life spent behind bars. "[It was] the ultimate for a kid like me. Out on the streets, I had suffered the sting of racism. Limitations had been placed on me because I was Hispanic and born poor."⁶⁵ Unlike other Chicanos who came of age in the 1960s, Blajos did not view political action as a way to reverse the limitations he felt racism imposed. Blajos continued to work for the Mafia, until a contract killing in prison went awry.

In the late 1970s Blajos was converted while trying to carry out a hit on a Mafia enemy. Blajos came very close to killing the person, but he failed to carry out the hit. He knew the consequences of such defiance but was allowed to leave prison unharmed. He left prison and entered rehab in northern California. Life in rehabilitation signaled a sea of changes in his life as he learned about and eventually accepted Christianity.

One time, Blajos' home director asked him to pray with his hands up, as if he were surrendering to the power of the Holy Spirit. Blajos had a difficult time with the ritual life of Pentecostalism, especially the loud singing and emotional prayers. Nevertheless, Blajos came to

⁵⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 68–69.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁶¹ Ibid., 79.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 83–84.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 84, 93.

embrace the faith. "In that short time, Jesus Christ did more for me than what seventeen years of prisons, psychiatrists, lawyers, drugs, money, power and sex had been unable to do. He gave me a new heart."⁶⁶ Blajos felt called to minister in Great Britain, where he is one of the Church's most popular evangelists. Because of Blajos, other members of the Mexican Mafia have gone through rehab and become popular, if controversial, spokespersons for the Church.⁶⁷

The last facet of reorienting converts to Pentecostalism, and especially reshaping their religious identities to become synchronous with the founder's vision, requires theological education beyond the Bible studies the Church offers. To complete our examination of how Victory Outreach inculcates new social values, we turn to the work of the Victory Outreach School of Ministry (hereafter referred to as VOSOM):

Often we have to change a person's belief system. In the inner city, there is widespread breakdown of the family. Many of our people came from broken homes where their parents dropped out of school themselves. Completing homework or showing any form of educational discipline was not a high priority. Most young men are more interested in joining a gang or making a name for themselves than going to school. Now that they are adults, we have to get them to think differently. Education is vital to the future of this ministry.⁶⁸

Del Castro, head of VOSOM, is charged with systematizing and bringing existing educational standards up to a level so that other Bible institutes, colleges, and seminaries accept VOSOM's transfer credits. Founded in 1984 as the Victory Bible School, it soon became VOSOM and shortly thereafter began granting certificates and diplomas. VOSOM wants to implant a vision and a sense of mission to its students, and many of its students are ill equipped educationally to take full advantage of Bible school. It is Castro's job to create a curriculum that supports what he calls "cutting edge" philosophy of ministry. He explains:

You can get away from that [cutting edge] and then you begin to get people that are not. . . . You could tell that it doesn't have that cutting edge and that is how come we train them like that, because we have learned throughout thirty years what works and what doesn't. Some

⁶⁶ Ibid., 152.

⁶⁷ Blajos' relocation to Great Britain, while related to his mission, in all probability became a necessity when the former hitman was himself placed on a hit list by the Mafia.

⁶⁸ Del Castro, "Victory Outreach School of Ministry: Equipping the Saints to Fulfill Vision 2000," *Inner City Vision* Special Edition of the 30th Anniversary, 1997, 29.

cities are Victory Outreach cities, some cities are not. . . . This is just the anointing of what God has given us. . . . We believe that there are a lot of other powerful ministries that are doing great works, Calvary Chapel, the Vineyard, but they all have their philosophy.⁶⁹

One of the major obstacles Castro faces is the generally low educational levels of VOSOM students in their ability to grasp theological concepts. He notes that most VOSOM students are high school drop-outs:

This is a challenge for me because a lot of them you know, we see that the reason why they don't get involved in school is because you know, they are lacking their [education] and they feel inadequate. And so that is where I need to develop some curriculum . . . that would not be so intimidating . . . and help them along as I am working with a brother right now . . . working with some new learning machines that they can learn on . . . at least like to get their GED . . . and with a machine, they don't get so intimidated as in a classroom.⁷⁰

Encouraging students to further their education, Castro rewrites the curriculum, stripping it of its theological jargon because:

First of all, they don't understand these big old theological or philosophical words, but then at the same time, you don't want to shy away from them. . . . You want to challenge them and so they can be familiar with these words . . . so they won't get intimidated when they get raised up.⁷¹

When someone confides in Castro that they cannot handle school, he challenges them with the idea that they cannot break out of the spiral of drugs and gangs that often captures generations of their families unless they begin to think of themselves as capable and changed people. "They come into another realm, another environment that is foreign to them and they feel intimidated. . . . A lot of times, they just click amongst themselves where they need to get out and begin to associate with the black brother, with the white . . . all are in Christ." Castro teaches that becoming a Christian changes not only self-destructive behavior, but it begins to change the level at which people tolerate one another. He sees it as his job to mentor students not only in terms of education, but in discipleship. To add the "cutting edge" to that, Castro adds: "We already have it in us per se, that loyalty and that faithfulness that we had to our neighborhoods and our gangs and we just turned

⁶⁹ Castro, interview, La Puente, California, November 12, 1997 (tape recording).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

that around for Jesus.”⁷² Loyalty and a sense of mission require the proper pedagogical instruments to bridge the levels from novitiate to pastor. This delicate balance between practical theology that reaches a predominantly undereducated class and the desire for theological and educational acceptance will become even more important as the church has begun the difficult process of retaining its second generation.

Throughout its thirty-year history, Victory Outreach has seen itself as the outsider. Indeed, church members thrive on the idea that “normal church can’t take them.” Why? Because they have set up an oppositional social construction of what they view as “evil.” How church members go about overcoming that evil is what their new religious faith is for, that it is Pentecostal answers the question of why so many of these narratives are infused by supernatural tales of the miraculous, the incomprehensible, and that which can only be understood by initiates. Why do these people, marginalized by the dominant society, brutalized by their partners, lost in a tidal wave of drugs, gangs, poverty, and hopelessness, not find their answers in secular political movements? or liberal religious movements? There is not one satisfactory answer to that question; what I have provided is one possible answer: that Victory Outreach, for the most part, speaks for itself and has given them some agency in a venue where they rarely have any—the academy. Victory Outreach’s answer emanates from an avowedly evangelical worldview, powered by a spiritual impulse so strong that it draws millions to its altars every Sunday—an answer that may disturb secular academics uncomfortable with any discussion of faith. It may equally disturb my brethren, who wonder why I do not let their truth stand as an affirmation for all the questions that I have about how a Pentecostal identity “works” and why I bother with such questions. I bother, as most people who seek to bridge the academic and evangelical worlds bother, because seeking academic validation may not be Victory Outreach’s goal, but it remains an elusive one of mine.

⁷² Ibid.